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ABSTRACT

The author reviews cross-cultural studies correlating women's reproductive functions with states of ritual defilement, pollution, and cultural restrictions on social behavior. Women's reproductive functions--childbirth, menstruation, and sexual intercourse--are frequently viewed as contaminating. Thus, during her menstrual period or period surrounding childbirth, a woman may be isolated to protect others, especially men, from sickness, injury, or loss of sexual potency. To date, anthropological studies of feminine pollution have produced some significant statistical correlations and a number of different and unrelated theoretical interpretations. In the first part of the paper, the author deals with theories pertaining to feminine pollution. Studies are discussed in which the extent of menstrual taboos has been found to correlate with social variables such as degree of male dominance, male solidarity, and social rigidity. It has also been correlated with certain customs affecting childhood socialization, notably the duration of the postpartum sex taboo. The second part of the paper discusses cross-cultural interpretations of menstrual taboos. Theoretical explanations of the existence and intensity of menstrual taboos and other forms of female pollution have used various ecological, social, and psychological facts as independent or mediating variables. In the final part of the paper, the author synthesizes the findings of various authors within a single theoretical framework. She suggests the following hypothesis: women will be seen as polluting to the degree that a culture assigns formal social power to men and women possess informal social power within the domestic unit. Women's informal social power can be illustrated by the post-partum sex taboo which increases the amount of time a mother spends with her children, thereby increasing their dependence on her and her social influence over them. This social power in societies formally dominated by men makes women anomalous, and therefore men fear them as polluting. (Author/AV)

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Women and Power: Problems of Feminine Pollution

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"And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even."

Leviticus XV: 19

A frequent, though not universal, cross-cultural phenomenon is the association of women's reproductive functions--childbirth, menstruation and sexual intercourse--with states of ritual defilement or pollution. Although women's reproductive functions are both perfectly normal and essential to the survival of the species, they are frequently seen as rendering a woman dangerous and potentially contaminating to others. Thus during her menstrual period or the period surrounding childbirth, a woman may be isolated or her activities and contacts restricted. These restrictions are generally not to protect the woman herself, but to protect others, especially men, from contagious sickness, injury or loss of physical or sexual potency.[1] In this respect, the rules surrounding menstruating or parturient women resemble the "customs of social

separation and abasement imposed on ethnic groups and low-caste persons, except, of course, that the latter apply at all times."[2]

While the fear of defilement through contact with a low-caste person or a menstruating woman has very real social and psychological consequences, it does not appear to be based on valid empirical evidence. There is no physical danger in having food or sex with an outcaste or a menstruating woman; the contamination is ritual and symbolic.

Anthropologists have taken various approaches to explaining feminine pollution, including ecological[3], structural[4], psychological[5] and sociological[6] points of view. Special attention has been paid to the problem of menstrual taboos, that is, to cultural restrictions on the social behavior of menstruating women. Young and Bacdayan[7] found that some cultural restrictions on the behavior of menstruants occurred in 49 of a worldwide sample of 61 societies. Furthermore, the extensiveness of menstrual taboos can be scored on a Guttman scale,[8] with steps ranging from a taboo on sexual intercourse for menstruating women, through prohibitions on contact with food and cooking utensils, to complete separation and isolation of menstruating women in menstrual huts. The extensiveness of menstrual taboos has been shown to correlate with a number of social and psychological variables.[9] Thus menstrual taboos are a particularly

well-studied aspect of feminine pollution, clearly expressing the symbolic contamination that some cultures attach to female reproductive functions.

The following discussion of feminine pollution will be divided into three parts. The first will deal with theories pertaining to feminine pollution in general. The second will discuss cross-cultural interpretations of menstrual taboos. The final section will bring together data and interpretations of different anthropologists under one single hypothesis, namely, that feminine pollution symbolizes the possession by women of non-legitimate social power. I assume that in all societies women's reproductive functions are a source of power, and that this power is symbolically represented in the belief system. Not only is reproduction essential to the existence of a society, but women as sexual partners and especially as mothers have influence over others, including men. I will refer to the ability to influence the behavior of others as social power. Formal, legitimate social power derives from one's position in an official hierarchy of authority while informal social power lies outside of the official authority system.[10] I suggest that ritual pollution will be associated with women to the degree that (a) formal social power is

in the hands of men and (b) women within domestic units have informal social power.[11] While both (a) and (b) may be present to some extent in all cultures, I predict that marked development of one or both will correlate with extensiveness of menstrual taboos.

Theories of Feminine Pollution

An ecological interpretation of beliefs in feminine pollution in the New Guinea Highlands has been suggested by Shirley Lindenbaum. Specifically, she suggests that feminine pollution in the Western New Guinea Highlands is an adaptation to population pressure on scarce ecoromic resources:

> The idea of female pollution is used as a cultural whip in societies where available resources are endangered by further population increase. Pollution is of less concern (Eastern Highlands) or absent (Central Highlands) where population expansion is not an environmental threat and is generally desired. Fear of pollution is a form of ideological birth control.[12]

Lindenbaum's hypothesis implies that beliefs in female contamination should decline with the introduction of mechanical methods of birth control. This hypothesis is worth testing beyond the confines of

the New Guinea Highlands. Logically, however, it appears to have one drawback, in that it does not offer any explanation of the nonsymmetrical nature of attitudes toward pollution. If pollution is ideological birth control, why is it women who are viewed as the polluters? Why are men not viewed as contaminating to women, or both sexes seen as mutually contaminating to each other? Why is it that women's social and sexual behavior is more strictly regulated cross-culturally than the behavior of men?[13] In the absence of additional assumptions, Lindenbaum's approach does not offer answers tc these questions.

Edward Harper[14] takes a more psychological approach to explaining beliefs in feminine pollution and in doing so comes to terms with their nonsymmetrical nature. He derives pollution from attitudes of fear and guilt felt toward people who occupy low status positions within a social system. Since guilt produces fear of retaliation, to the degree that a group is powerless and disadvantaged, it will be portrayed symbolically as dangerous and destructive. He derives this hypothesis from a comparison of attitudes toward women among wealthy, dominant Havik Brahmins and other castes in Southern India. Among Havik Brahmins, widows and women in general are regarded as dangerous and polluting:

> For Havik Brahmins, ritual defilement is of major concern..., and women are a potent source of pollution. Menstruating women and women who have recently given birth to a child - in other words, women in states which emphasize their femaleness - are segregated, and inadvertent contact with them causes much greater ritual pollution than does contact with a member of an Untouchable caste.[15]

Women are also thought to be sexual temptresses; sexual intercourse is ritually defiling to men, saps their vitality, and turns their thoughts from holy pursuits and the attainment of salvation.

The menacing symbolic power of Havik Brahmin women is in contrast to their lack of official power in the social system. Havik men have formal authority over women. Women reside with their husbands' extended families, and family property is controlled by males. Within the household men are supposed to show fraternal solidarity, while wives are looked upon as disruptive and quarrelsome. Women do not contribute to agriculture. They are prohibited from attaining higher sacred knowledge and are dependent on their husbands for economic support and religious salvation.

> A woman in the role of wife is subordinate to the desires, the whims and the angers of her husband. An oft-quoted statement is that for a wife her husband is her god.[16]

However, there is a discrepancy between Havik attitudes toward women as wives and their attitudes toward women as mothers, sisters and daughters. Havik mothers are deeply respected and revered, while sisters and daughters are treated with affection.

In contrast to Havik wives, women in the lower castes have much higher status relative to their men. Among Sudras and Untouchables, extended families are rare and family authority is divided rather equally between husband and wife. Women may own property, earn wages, work in the fields, and engage in financial transactions. "In terms of personality attributes, Sudra women tend to be bold, self-assured, and independent."[17] Harper also states that menstrual taboos are much less important among lower castes than among Havik Brahmins. There is, in other words, an inverse relationship between feminine pollution and the degree of feminine autonomy within the caste.

Harper explains feminine pollution among Havik Brahmins as the result of male guilt and fear over the low status of Havik women:

> Haviks feel guilty about the subordinate status of women. Because of the guilt the belief exists that women...feel resentment and believe themselves the victims of an

> injustice. To the extent that women are believed to feel resentment they would be expected to desire retaliation. Hence, if they are believed to desire revenge, they would be conceived as potentially dangerous.[18]

Harper also suggests that guilt develops because of contradictions between men's attitudes toward their mothers and their wives.

> Thus, it seems possible that a man who dominates his wife but also sees her in the capacity of mother to his children could feel a contradiction; and as one of the early attitudes towards women that he learned was respect for his mother, this is basic enough to cause him concern over his secondarily acquired feelings toward women as wives.[19]

In other words, feminine pollution arises not just from woman's subordinate status, but from male ambivalence resulting from the discrepancy between her position as wife and her position as mother.

The presence of cognitive dissonance as a source of pollution is emphasized in the work of Mary Douglas. According to Douglas, certain phenomena are viewed as polluting because they are "anomalous," that is, they do not fit the system of categories into which a

particular culture has organized the universe. Insofar as social norms are defined by men in terms of masculine interests, women may behave in ways that are alien or contradictory to them.

> ...women defy the ideals of the male order. They may be defined as virgins, yet be necessary to the group's regeneration. They may be excluded from authority, yet exercise all sorts of informal power.[20]

Where women are defined as powerless, yet exercise power over men, the anomaly gives rise to menstrual taboos and beliefs in feminine pollution. This paper will explore the idea that anomalous female power is the social reality that underlies the symbols of feminine contamination.

Psychogenic and Sociogenic Interpretations of Menstrual Taboos

It has been pointed out that menstrual taboos vary in extensiveness from culture to culture, and that their extensiveness has been scaled and found to correlate with a number of social and psychological variables. Young and Bacdayan[21] have contrasted two kinds of explanations for menstrual taboos. A sociogenic explanation sees such social facts as menstrual taboos as rising from particular forms

of social organization, without reference to psychological states of individuals. A psychogenic interpretation, on the other hand, uses such individual psychological variables as guilt, anxiety and ambivalence to explain patterns of social behavior. For example, it is said that menstrual taboos are an institutionalized response to child-rearing patterns that promote castration anxiety in individual males.[22] Child-rearing institutions thus produce a type of individual whose needs are met by a particular symbolic system.

I do not wish to become embroiled in the controversy over whether statements about society and culture can be "reduced" to statements about individual behavior, or whether it is illegitimate to explain sociocultural phenomena in terms of individual-level abstractions.[23] Instead, I will describe psychogenic and sociogenic interpretations of menstrual taboos, and then reinterpret the data in terms of my own hypothesis.

Such authors as Geza Roheim[24] and George Devereux[25] made early attempts to "explain" menstrual taboos in terms of Freudian Psychology. Building on their work, William Stephens tested the Freudian hypothesis that castration anxiety in males expresses itself in institutionalized fear of menstruating women.

> I assume that the sight or thought of a person who bleeds from the genitals (a menstruating woman) is frightening to a person who has intense castration anxiety. It is a reminder of genital injury.[25]

According to Freud, castration anxiety rises from the Oedipus complex, in which the male child feels sexual desire for his mother and rivalry toward his father. The rivalry leads him to fear retaliation from his father in the form of genital injury. Stephens assumes that there is a correspondence between the extensiveness of menstrual taboos and the intensity and frequency of castration anxiety in a society's male population.

Stephens does not attempt to measure castration anxiety directly, but sees it as an unmeasured intervening variable between child-rearing practices that intensify castration anxiety, on the one hand, and severity of menstrual taboos, on the other. Thus he measures the correlations between child-rearing practices which he sees as theoretically linked to castration anxiety and the intensity of menstrual taboos as scored on a Guttman scale. One of his primary predictors of strong Oedipal feelings and castration anxiety in men is the existence of a long post-partum sex taboo for women. The long post-partum sex taboo is a rule that prohibits women from

having sexual intercourse for a year or more after childbirth, and is fairly common in many non-Western societies.[27] Stephens argues that by imposing sexual continence on the mother, the long post-partum sex taboo focuses her sexual interest on her child, and causes her to behave toward him in sexually arousing ways, thus intensifying his Oedipal feelings. He then predicts and finds a significant positive correlation between the long post-partum sex taboo and the extensiveness of menstrual taboos, which he sees as confirming his Oedipal explanation.

Stephens finds significant positive correlations between several other "predictors" of castration anxiety[28] and extensiveness of menstrual taboos, but the post-partum sex taboo plays a crucial role in "explaining" severity of castration anxiety. If the post-partum sex taboo is <u>not</u> linked conceptually with castration anxiety, then Stephens' argument becomes more tenuous. The Oedipal interpretation of the post-partum sex taboo is based on the work of Whiting, Kluckhohn and Anthony.[29] More recent work by Burton and Whiting[30] sets forth a different interpretation. Burton and Whiting view such customs as exclusive mother-child sleeping arrangements and the post-partum sex taboo as encouraging primary identification of the child with the mother, rather than as strengthening the child's Oedipal

feelings. To the degree that the mother gives and withholds resources desired by the child, the child will envy and identify with her. If the post-partum sex taboo focuses the attention of the mother on the child, it may encourage childhood dependence and identification with the mother. Thus while Stephens links the post-partum sex taboo with intense Oedipal feelings, Burton and Whiting link it to early maternal identification.

Stephens' and Burton and Whiting's views regarding the post-partum sex taboo are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Karen Horney[31] in a much earlier paper suggested that "masculine castration-anxiety is very largely the response to the wish to be a woman" (author's emphasis)."[32] Later I will argue that Burton and Whiting's interpretation may be more useful than Stephens' for purposes of explaining menstrual taboos.

In contrast to Stephens' psychogenic interpretation, Young and Bacdayan offer a sociogenic explanation of menstrual taboos. Using a modification of Stephens' Guttman scale, Young and Bacdayan have found significant correlations between extensiveness of menstrual taboos and (a) male solidarity "as evidenced by an exclusive male activity such as a secret society, a men's house, or a community-wide set of age-grades"[33] and (b) scores for male dominance.[34] They consider that menstrual taboos, on the one hand, and male solidarity and dominance, on the other, are aspects of a single over-all

structural dimension which they refer to as "social rigidity." Social rigidity is defined as relative lack of intercommunication among the parts of a system. It follows that

> a group wherein men and women are sharply separated, as measured either by male solidarity or by menstrual taboos, is clearly rigid.
>
> Rigidity may be alternatively defined as the degree of cleavage or compartmentalization in a group's definition of its situation. So stated, it is apparent that high solidarity in a subsystem can only occur if the system as a whole is rigid or low in solidarity. Thus there is no doubt that Whites in many Southern states maintain a unified definition of their situation, but if Negroes are also included in our conception of the total system we have no alternative, according to the definition, but to rate it low on solidarity because of its structural dualization.[35]

Thus social separation of women and solidarity of men are interpreted as two sides of a coin; the same taboos that separate and isolate the out-group mark the identity and solidarity of the in-group.

The authors assert the relationship between menstrual taboos and male solidarity and dominance as a tautology, rising from the definition of social rigidity. They do not identify the conditions that cause some societies to be rigid while others are not. However, they do point out that rigid social systems are "highly reactive to outside threat and militant in combatting it,"[36] and that male solidarity is associated with intercommunity warfare and with horticultural systems that require heavy contributions of feminine labor.

Conclusions

Anthropological studies of feminine pollution have to date resulted in the discovery of some significant statistical correlations and a number of different and unrelated theoretical interpretations. Extensiveness of menstrual taboos has been found to correlate with such social variables as degree of male dominance, male solidarity, and social rigidity, and also with certain customs affecting childhood socialization, notably the duration of the post-partum sex taboo. Theoretical explanations of the existence and intensity of menstrual taboos (and other forms of female pollution) have used various ecological, social and psychological facts

as independent or mediating variables. There is, however, as yet no cohesion or unity among the approaches, and each addresses itself to different aspects of the data. For instance, Stephens' castration anxiety approach does not predict or explain the correlation of menstrual taboos with male solidarity and social rigidity, as discovered by Young and Bacdayan. Similarly, Young and Bacdayan's social rigidity hypothesis does not predict or explain the correlation of menstrual taboos and the long post-partum sex taboo. Comparing their approach with Stephens', Young and Bacdayan come to the conclusion that "...castration anxiety and rigidity are separate and equally strong predictors of the elaboration of menstrual taboos."[37]

In an effort to bring the findings of various authors together within a single theoretical framework, I suggest the following hypothesis: Women will be seen as polluting to the degree that (a) a culture assigns formal social power to men and (b) women possess informal social power within the domestic unit. In other words, <u>woman's nonlegitimate ritual power is symbolic of nonlegitimate social power</u>. Though none of the studies outlined here constitutes a direct test of this hypothesis, it is nevertheless

consistent with data presented independently by a number of authors. Young and Bacdayan found extensiveness of menstrual taboos to correlate with male solidarity and scores for male dominance. These measures both imply that formal social power is in the hands of men. The long post-partum sex taboo, as interpreted by Burton and Whiting, may indicate a high degree of informal social power in the hands of women. If it increases dependence on and primary identification with the mother, then the long post-partum sex taboo should also intensify the mother's social influence over her children, even though this influence may not be part of and may in fact run counter to the official hierarchy of power.

My hypothesis is also consistent with Harper's data that Havik Brahmin mothers are greatly respected, while Havik wives are socially and economically subordinate and inferior to their husbands. Finally, the approach is in agreement with Mary Douglas' thesis that what is polluting is anomalous, and that women are anomalous to the degree that they possess power in societies that are formally dominated by men.

It is worth noting that my explanation is sociogenic, in that it derives feminine pollution from contradictions in the

distribution of formal and informal power in a social system. It differs from most sociogenic approaches because it explicitly takes account of informal social power. Stephens and Harper have shown that it is also possible to construct psychogenic explanations for feminine pollution. Perhaps this is because discrepancies between formal power and informal power can and do give rise to internal stresses in individuals, and these stresses are manifested in such psychological dimensions as guilt, anxiety, ambivalence and role conflict.

Footnotes

1. William N. Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence (New York: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 95-97.

2. Frank W. Young and Albert A. Bacdayan, "Menstrual Taboos and Social Rigidity," in Cross-Cultural Approaches: Readings in Comparative Research, ed. Clellan S. Ford (New Haven, Conn: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1967), p. 95.

3. Shirley Lindenbaum, "Sorcerors, Ghosts and Polluting Women: an Analysis of Religious Belief and Population Control," Ethnology 11 (July 1972): 241-253.

4. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger (New York: Praeger, 1966).

5. Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence, and "A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos," in Ford, pp.67-94.

6. Young and Bacdayan, in Ford, pp. 95-110.

7. Ibid., p. 96.

8. Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence, p. 90; Young and Bacdayan, p. 96.

9. See Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence and "A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos," and Young and Bacdayan.

10. Louise Lamphere, "Women in Domestic Groups," in Woman, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 97-112, uses the term "unassigned power." "... in domestic groups where men hold the authority positions and have the legitimate right to make decisions binding on others, women may hold unassigned power, that is, the means of gaining compliance with their actions through withholding food and sexual services: (p. 99).

11. As the subsequent discussion will show, this hypothesis is suggested by Mary Douglas.

12. Lindenbaum, pp. 247-248.

13. See William N. Stephens, The Family in Cross-Cultural Perspective (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1963), p. 264ff.

14. Edward B. Harper, "Fear and the Status of Women," Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 25 (Spring 1969): 81-95.

15. Ibid., p. 85.

16. Ibid., p. 89.

17. Ibid., p. 92.

18. Ibid., p. 93.

19. Ibid.

20. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: a Theoretical Overview," in Woman, Culture, and Society, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 32.

21. Young and Bacdayan, p. 103.

22. See Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence and "A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos."

23. See Frank W. Young, "The Function of Male Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-Cultural Test of an Alternative Hypothesis," American Journal of Sociology 67 (January 1962): 379-396.

24. Geza Roheim, The Eternal Ones of the Dream: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Australian Myth and Ritual (New York: International Universities Press, 1945).

25. George Devereux, "The Psychology of Feminine Genital Bleeding," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 31 (1950): 237-257.

26. Stephens, The Oedipus Complex: Cross-Cultural Evidence, p. 93.

27. "It seems to occur frequently in Negro Africa, Melanesia, and Western North America; in Asia, it appears to be relatively rare." Ibid., p. 3.

28. These include punishment for masturbation, overall severity of sex training, and the father as the main disciplinarian. Ibid., pp. 102, 103 and 111.

29. John W. M. Whiting, Richard Kluckhohn, and Albert Anthony, "The Function of Male Initiation Rites at Puberty," in Readings in

Social Psychology, third ed., ed. Eleanor E. Maccoby, Theodore M. Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1958), pp. 359-370

30. Roger V. Burton and John W. M. Whiting, "The Absent Father and Cross-Sex Identity," Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development 7 (April 1961): 85-95.

31. Karen Horney, "The Dread of Women," International Journal of Psychoanalysis 13 (July 1932): 348-360.

32. Ibid., p. 358.

33. Young and Bacdayan, p. 100.

34. Ibid., p. 103.

35. Ibid., p. 101.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 106.